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ABSTRACT

Questions concerning the appropriate level of, and foundation for, professional education in social work have been raised. A study was undertaken to compare the professional achievements of individuals holding master's degrees in social work (MSWs) who had different types of undergraduate education. Subjects were 719 MSW graduates of the 5 years, 1977 through 1981, from the 7 public universities in California that offer the MSW. Of these respondents, 125 had bachelor's degrees in social work (BSWs) and 594 had bachelor of arts degrees (BAs). Subjects completed questionnaires measuring 10 areas of professional achievement and provided demographic and occupational information. The findings revealed differences between BSWs and BAs. On all 10 measures of professional achievement, the MSWs with BAs, as a group, outperformed the MSWs with BSWs. These findings support the contention that a liberal arts undergraduate education is superior to a professional undergraduate education for those who go on to do graduate work. The value of a liberal arts education needs to be communicated to entering college freshmen so that they can direct their studies wisely. (NB)

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The Value of a Liberal Arts Education to the Professionally Trained

by
Dr. Charles H. Frost

Questions concerning the appropriate level of, and foundation for, professional education in social work have been at issue throughout most of this century. In the early 1930's, after nearly a decade of hot debate, Social Work chose to follow the path of other professions in America and established education at the graduate level (MSW) as the major requirement for entry into the profession.(1) The American Association of Schools of Social Work ruled in 1937 that a two-year graduate program would be required of schools applying for accreditation after 1939.(2) This remained the primary criterion for professional entry in social work until 1975 when the Council on Social Work Education recognized and began accreditation of bachelor-level programs in social work (BSW). Earlier, in 1971, the National Association of Social Workers had begun admitting BSW's to membership.

Over the last decade, the number of accredited BSW programs in the United States has more than doubled; there were 151 in 1975 and 303 in 1981.(3) The number of graduate programs remained at approximately 87 during that period. Along with the growth of BSW programs, there has been an increase in the number of MSW programs that are "combined" or "joint," that is, which offer a BSW and MSW in five years (approximately half of MSW programs).(4) There has also been an increase in the number of programs offering "advanced standing" in MSW programs on the basis of undergraduate work in social work (approximately half of MSW programs) and in the number of part-time MSW programs and work-study MSW programs.(5)

There were, of course, a variety of social and economic factors in the 1960's and 1970's that spurred these changes in social work education.

These factors included an enormous demand for social services personnel, the civil rights movement, and a general increase in the demand for higher education.

Because of these developments, there has been a marked increase in the number of students entering graduate education with the BSW, many of whom then complete their education in less than the standard six years than had been the expectation in earlier days, or with fewer units of study than was once required. The effect of these changes in educational preparation for the profession merits evaluation. If the BSW degree, along with the various arrangements that accelerate the time required for completing the MSW that flow from it, serves the profession and the community well, it ought to be encouraged. However, these new arrangements ought not to be embraced merely because they prove to be efficient and econonmic means of producing BSW's and MSW's. The following long-run question must be answered: Are these arrangements effective? That is, do they result, at the least, in adding to the profession social workers who can demonstrate as high a level of professional acheivement as are produced by the more traditional pattern of a liberal arts undergraduate degree followed by two years of graduate education? If that is not the case, the profession stands in danger of fostering a system of education that will be less expensive and more efficient in the short run, but which will undermine the quality and further development of the profession in the long run.

It should be noted that the pre-professional vs. liberal arts debate in undergraduate education is not unique to social work education. There are similar disagreements among educators in other professions such as engineering, business administration and education. In an article in a recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, for example, it is argued that liberal

arts majors make superior professionals in business administration by comparison to graduates who had specialized too early, that the liberal arts are more likely to produce people "who have those intangible qualities of intelligence, imagination, curiosity, impulses, emotions, and ingenuity."[6]

A sufficient number of leaders in social work education, such as David Fanshel [7], Gilbert Geis[8], and others[9] have argued that a strong liberal arts education prior to graduate school is preferable to the BSW. This research is an effort to illuminate some aspects of this argument by comparing the "professional achievements" of MSW's who have had different types of undergraduate education.

Theory and Methodology

One of the assumptions in this research is that the singular characteristic that most distinguishes professionals from others is a capacity to think about, make judgments about, and integrate knowledge in their work. This characteristic is, of course, difficult to measure. However, it is demonstrated when professionals conceptualize and write about their work, and by the extent to which they communicate with and synthesize knowledge about practice and programs for others.

The characteristic to be measured -- "professional achievement" -- emerges over time and cannot be identified at the point of graduation from a degree program. Presenting and publishing papers, and holding office in a professional association, for example, are the kinds of professional activity that most MSW's do not engage in straight away after graduation. More likely these professional achievements will crystallize most emphatically in five or more years after completion of the MSW. Thus, the population studied -- MSW graduates of the classes of 1977 to 1981, who were out of school only for from one to five years, would be less likely to demonstrate professional

achievements than their counterparts who had graduated before 1977. It is expected, therefore, that any differences found between BA's and BSW's in these cohorts of graduates would become even stronger over time.

The major hypothesis of the study is that MSW's with liberal arts undergraduate educations, i.e., BA's, are more likely to be high professional achievers than MSW's with Bachelors of Social Work (BSW) educations. This hypothesis is based on the second assumption in this research which is: Students are more likely to acquire from a liberal arts education the intellectual and scholarly preparation required for writing, communicating, synthesizing knowledge for, and conceptualizing about practice than from a BSW education.

The indicators used for professional achievement are as follows:

1. Is the Respondent (R) employed in the field of social work?
2. What is the Rs salary level?
3. Is the Rs primary professional work concerned with conceptualizing tasks or with practice tasks? (Conceptualizing tasks are those concerned with supervising, teaching, administering and planning programs, and research; practice tasks are concerned with providing counseling, casework, group work, and psychotherapeutic services to clients.)
4. Has the R achieved the California License (LCSW) for clinical social work practice?
5. Does the R hold office in a professional association?
6. Does the R participate in continuing education programs?
7. Does the R attend conferences?
8. Has the R presented a paper at a conference?
9. Has the R published a paper?

10. Has the R enrolled in an advanced degree program after completing the MSW?

In using these ten indicators of professional achievement, the expectation was that we would, for the most part, find small proportions of all Rs in the achieving group. However, we believe these small percentages of the professional population are significant because they represent the intellectual, political, and administrative leadership of the profession.

Questionnaires were sent to 2579 MSW graduates of the five years, 1977 through 1981, from the seven public universities in California that offer the MSW.(10) The questionnaire was sent from the school from which the R had graduated, with a cover letter from the dean of that school.

A total of 790 questionnaires were returned, 71 of which were not usable. Thus, we had usable responses from 719 Rs. Of these, 125 had BSW's (17.1%) and 594 (82.6%) had BA's.

Within the group of Rs, we find approximately the same proportions of men and women (28% and 72%) as in the graduating classes of the California schools and MSW graduates nationwide in 1977-81. The distribution of ethnic minorities is approximately the same among the group of Rs as among the MSW graduates of the California schools. And, as expected, the return rate decreases with each year since graduation. This occurs because, over time, the schools tend to lose contact with their alumni. Thus, our R group is heavily weighted toward recent graduates.

The questionnaire included questions that covered the 10 measures of professional achievement described above as well as descriptive information on year of graduation, age, sex, degrees, time elapsed between graduation and first job, and amount of full-time work experience prior to the MSW.

Findings

The study findings indicate that there are differences between BSWs and BAs in the direction hypothesized on all ten of the measures used to rate professional achievement. These findings are summarized in the following Table. As can be noted in this table, on all 10 measures of professional achievement the MSWs with BAs, as a group, out-perform the MSWs with BSWs.

Tables have been run to control for the following factors that might be expected to affect these associations: year of graduation; full-time experience prior to enrollment in the MSW; whether the degree was obtained

Table
COMPARISON OF PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENT BETWEEN MSW/BA GRADUATES AND MSW/BSW GRADUATES (percentages)

Factor	MSW/BA (n = 594)	MSW/BSW (n = 125)
Employment		
Full-time	82.9	76.0
Part-time	11.7	10.8
Unemployed	5.4	13.2
Salary		
$19,000+	60.1	48.0
Primary Professional Tasks		
Conceptual tasks	29.3	24.3
Practice tasks	70.7	75.7
Licensed Clinical Social Work	20.9	16.0
Office in Professional Associaton	7.2	6.4
Continuing Education	82.2	75.0
Conference Attendance	76.0	69.1
Conference Presentation	8.0	4.8
Publications	6.6	3.2
Enrollment in Advanced Degree Program	8.1	2.4

from the University of California or from the California State University; race; and gender. With some exceptions, we find that the relationships reported above do not change when these control variables are introduced. For example, minority Rs are more likely to have the BSW than a BA; but when the analysis is controlled for race, the differences between BAs and BSWs are about the same as for the whole population. Women are more likely to be unemployed than men, and they are more likely than men to attend conferences, to hold office in a professional association, and to enroll in an advanced degree program. Still, when the analysis is controlled for gender, the same differences emerge as reported for the whole population.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study indicates that MSWs with BA educations are considerably more likely to report professional achievements than those with BSW educations. Almost four times as many have enrolled in advanced degree programs, three times as many have published, almost two times as many have presented at conferences, and so forth. And, as indicated earlier, because we are dealing with MSWs who are out of school for only from one to five years, the data very likely underestimates the differences that would appear over the course of a full professional career. The findings support the contention that a liberal arts undergraduate education is superior to a professional undergraduate education for those who go on to do graduate work. The catch is, most social workers do not obtain a graduate degree. No one in the profession argues that a liberal arts undergraduate degree is superior to a professional undergraduate degree if you are going to be a social worker without graduate training. The BSW is better than the BA if that is going to be the end of your education. However, the study supports the value and the need for the study of the liberal arts for professionals. Therefore,

every effort should be made to encourage professionals to take liberal arts courses. Unfortunately, there are frequent pressures in the opposite direction.

Professional schools tend to discourage students from taking liberal arts courses. When this behavior by proessional schools is admitted, it is usually "justified" in terms of the large volume of specific professional subject matter courses the student must already take. The contention is that not enough time is available for other courses. Regardless of the degree of validity of this position, the discouragement is also, to a degree, the result of "turf" protection. Professors need to maximize enrollment and so they maximize required courses within their department. It is clearly recognized by the leaders of every profession that various liberal arts courses are essential to the effective and ethical functioning of any professional. However, priorities direct "logic" and influence professions away from the liberal arts regardless of their value.

Numerous recommendations could be made to try and reduce or eliminate the pressures within professional schools that direct students away from the liberal arts. Accrediting organizations could, and sometimes do, exert a counter balancing pressure; degree requirements could be expanded and the length of time required for the degree increased accordingly; or programs could be encouraged to reduce the number of required courses. Despite any merit to these or other recommendations, their likelihood of enactment is close to nil due to various competitive forces both within and between universities.

What I would recommend is that the university create a required course for ALL entering Freshmen that helps them understand the values of liberal arts. This course would be team taught by faculty from ALL departments.

Professors from professional schools, the liberal arts, and the sciences would all participate and provide the entering student with an understanding of how these disciplines enrich one another. The focus would be on encouraging the student to value the liberal arts, to give consideration to extending his education so that it can be a fuller and more productive experience.

If educational leaders believe in the value of a liberal arts education, and historically they have so believed, then these values need to be communicated to entering Freshmen so that they can direct their studies wisely. Some will then extend their studies beyond four years, others will redirect their studies so that they incorporate more liberal arts courses, and some capable students who would have dropped out of school may discover a field of study they had not considered and retention of these students will be enhanced. If the course is well designed and rigorously taught, all students will see the themes common to all educational endeavor; will value Shakespeare's role in the life of the engineering student; will understand Picasso's contribution to social work; will move toward the ideal student, the student who is balanced, who sees all of life as a wonderous, vibrant gestalt; who perceives the need for life-long learning in subjects related to his profession and in the liberal arts.

NOTES

(1) This debate is documented in Leslie Leighninger, The Development of Social Development of Social Work as a Profession: 1930-1960, Doctoral Dissertation, School of Social Welfare, U. C., Berkeley, 1982, pp. 48-70.

(2) ibid., p. 207.

(3) Joseph Sheehan, Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States: 1975, p. 1, and Allen, Rubin, Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States: 1981, CSWE, p. 1.

(4) ibid., (Rubin) p. 3.

(5) ibid., p. 62

(6) Sam Bittner, "Liberal Arts Majors Prove Specialization Isn't Required for Success in Business," The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 14, 1982; Washington, D. C.

(7) As quoted in Miriam Dinerman, Social Work Curriculum at the Baccalaureate and Master's Levels, the Silberman Fund, N. Y., 1981, p. XV.

(8) Gilbert Geis, "Liberal Education and Social Welfare: Educational Choices and Their Consequences," Journal of Education for Social Work, Vol. I, No. 1, 1965, pp. 26-32.

(9) Maxine Greene, "The Humanities and Social Work Education," Journal of Education for Social Work, Vol. II, No.1, Spring, 1966, pp. 21-31; Gordon J. Aldridge and Earl J. McGrath, Liberal Education and Social Work, N. Y.: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1965; Boehm, W. Werner, Objectives of the Social Work Curriculum of the Future, N. Y.: Council on Social Work Eduction, 1959, Vol. 1; Paul Derrick, "Liberal Education and the Social Work Education" Journal of Education for Social Work, 14(1), 1978, pp. 31-38.

(10) The schools are: U.C. Berkeley; U.C.L.A.; and the California State Universities at Fresno, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, and San Jose.